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PREEMPTIVE INCENTIVE/FIRST STRIKE

Explain the different types of first strike. Focus on those most likely in the flashpoint of a crisis. Decision-making under such conditions is often dangerous guesswork.

First strike threat: posing a significant threat to the opponent's deterrent.

Explore U.S. reliance on the threat of nuclear first use in order to deter conventional or nuclear war. Trace through early U.S. superiority, to MAD's functional parity, to the counterforce era. First strike capability represents a desperate attempt to maintain the nuclear threat as a viable underpinning of our foreign policy.

The U.S. has used nuclear weapons a dozen or more times since Hiroshima, in the same way a gun is used during a robbery when it is pointed at the victim in order to cause the desired behavior.

Outline what dangerous developments are proceeding under the cloak of "modernization."

Why pursue this course, with its inherent risks for the whole planet? "They see possible losses if this mechanism of first strike threats/escalation dominance was abandoned. These losses are regarded as unthinkable, and worth playing Russian roulette to prevent (e.g., possible loss of U.S. control of the distribution of Middle East oil). Current U.S. control of the oil is regarded as "having so great a bearing on our hegemony over Western Europe, in our financial hegemony in the world, and generally our power position and our profit position, as to justify a rather considerable risk of losing it all."

Preemption_Incentive

When a weapon is vulnerable, it is more credible to threaten others with. Along with vulnerable weapons, invulnerable weapons are needed to make the threat fall short of being so believable that the Soviets might be tempted to follow through on a first strike believing that they could escape total annihilation.

What makes a first strike threat credible is not the comparison of the consequences of going first to the consequences of losing the particular confrontation. To lose the confrontation would always look better to them. Rather, they are comparing the possibility of going first to a much less stringent criterium:

going first versus going second. That does not require that you come out well. It doesn't even require, to do it, that you will come out better than catastrophically. It just requires that you have to believe that there are levels of catastrophe; the catastrophe associated with going first need only seem preferable to the catastrophe of going second. There will be military men who will see that difference.

To make a credible threat that you are going to initiate nuclear weapons use at any level--against Soviet troops outside the Soviet Union, or a Soviet ally--you need some credible basis for believing that they will not reply. The only reason they would not reply would be your credible readiness to escalate the conflict AND some credibility that if they replied to that, you would go to a first strike.

The only reason to make a first strike under any circumstances--to make this a credible possibility--is a belief that you can significantly disarm the opponent, or that you will be significantly better off by avoiding what appears to be their imminent first strike.

To make it credible that you might deliberately press the button (as opposed to a drunken fit of despair or an accident), then you need weapons that can credibly be used in escalatory steps.

High level military planners will almost certainly say, in a crisis, "We must use these weapons before we lose them." Each side knows that the other must be thinking: "We may be only hours away from all-out war. Does it pay us to wait to find out, hoping that it won't go that far?" Each is likely to be giving little thought to surrender.

To my knowledge, preemption has never been discussed as a threat, but as a form of insurance, a way of limiting damage if war is forced on you. Only in one circumstance does a first strike remain credible: a preemptive attack. (An escalatory attack would be suicide.) (?) "Striking second first"

Military personnel believe that they are preserving security through weapons that will only be used to ensure deterrence through mutual threat. But the danger is: threats require actions to increase their credibility, and those actions in turn make it difficult to retreat from those threats if the opponent fails to back down. Proponents of our current strategic policies have not faced the fact that threats such as we rely on are very likely to lead, ultimately, to devastating war. Opponents, particularly in the last 20 years, have failed to back down quite regularly.

The Pershing II is the first weapon on either side which offers a rather credible escalation potential. It is vulnerable, thus under the use-or-lose pressure in a crisis. Because of this hair-trigger situation, the Soviets have more reason to fear that if they threaten us, we are more likely to use the missiles in a jittery moment. Hence, it poses a more credible threat. Also, it has a small enough yield and great enough accuracy to be used somewhere like Iran in a crisis. Supposedly, it could "take out" an Iranian city without affecting Russian lands directly. (Ditto Command and Control, etc.)...So the Pershing is a potentially useable weapon in the early stages of the escalatory ladder. War planners believe they might be able to use it militarily without pushing the Russians far enough to use their nuclear weapons on us. Since the Soviets' weapons are "less discriminating," they would be likely to provoke severe retaliation by the U.S.....Pershing is the first weapon on either side that has sufficient accuracy to offer the hope of hitting significant military targets without destroying towns. (Or is this a dangerously illusory best-case scenerio?)

We are not seeking superiority in the old sense--i.e., the ability to devastate the other country while destroying their retaliatory capabilities. We are not seeking this because it is no longer possible to attain. What we seek in its place is escalation dominance: the capabilities to pose more credible threats to escalate than the other side can pose. The limited nuclear warfighting model seeks a way for us to retain the ability to make credible threats with nuclear weapons to support our economic/political interests. Seen in this light, the apparently purposeless nature of the seemingly random arms build-up becomes instead a deliberate series of choices with particular intended results.

Nitze's underlying premise: The only way your expeditionary force can have reliability is to have credibility of threats posed by each level of potential escalation to use of nuclear forces: "credibility all the way up the ladder."

The model currently used by war planners is based on the threat of preemptive attack. Such a threat requires a degree of symmetry of capability on the two sides: specifically, a degree of vulnerability of your own weapons is required.

We rely on the strategic triad, in part, because: "If your opponent cannot disarm you at all significantly, it is not going to be credible that you fear he is about to strike you, unless you believe he is crazy. If we only had submarines and he only had land-based missiles, a preemptive attack on his part would not look very credible. Therefore, it would not look very credible that we would ever come to fear nothing by doing it. So in order to have a credible apparent basis for believing that you are about to be struck and that it would be preferable to preempt, both sides must have a vulnerable counterforce capability. To have a preemptive threat, both sides must have a preemptive threat."

"Madman's Bluff": The Strategy of Ambiguity
The Political Uses of Madness

When using the madman theory, the government confronts a two-audience problem. How do you make a credible threat to the Soviet Union without scaring Americans or inciting them to oppose you?

One can appear mad by seeming to be out of control either of oneself or of events.

When people learn about first use threats by the U.S., they want to believe that these are mere bluffs, not serious threats. But it is mad even to bluff, particularly with present force levels. Many wars have started with bluffs.

In World War I, forces were propelled into war by strong pressures to mobilize rather than face probable defeat at the hands of the mobilizing opponent. One side's mobilization confirmed the worst fears of the other, which immediately mobilized to avoid certain defeat. (The U.S., unlike Europe, did not have to mobilize quickly because its oceans protected it.)

When one side gains a preemptive ability, the security of the other side seems to require the development of a similar capability.

If the choice were either to strike first or make the peace, the choice would be clear. But an apparent choice either of striking first or being struck first would not be as clear. This is the strain of "logic" which might well govern nuclear decision-making in a crisis.

It can be argued that even if the other side gets a credible first strike capability, our first priority should be never to give them a basis to believe that they are about to be struck first. Beefing up a first strike ability of our own greatly reduces our security.

Merely imitating a first strike capability is the most dangerous of all possible courses. It makes a nuclear exchange more likely, because it creates a false belief that you might come out better by using it.

A strong first strike force could seem worth using even if the other side wasn't about to strike first. It could look preferable to losing a non-nuclear war or losing "vital interests."

"Ideologically blind" can translate to mean "mad."

Re the START proposals: If we have fewer weapons but a greater percentage of first strike weapons within the remaining arsenals, the dangers are much greater. If the other side has fewer weapons, it is much more tempting to preempt.

The most dangerous of all possible worlds is one with a high percentage of vulnerable first strike weapons on each side. Reagan's START proposals would have moved us in that direction.

"Arms reductions" can actually be militarily desirable. For example, getting rid of the Polaris saves money and trouble.

It has not up to this point seemed feasible to threaten a preemptive strike. But if you develop a strong first strike ability, you can say to the other side, "Don't let this conflict get too big, or one or the other of us might find ourselves in the position of being strongly pressured to go first. If this thing gets going, it may be hard to stop."

Using the threat of a preemptive strike in a conventional conflict to control its outcome is akin to pouring gasoline down the aisles of a movie theater, to help enforce the "No Smoking" sign.

When a non-nuclearized nation, with a non-aggressive posture, mobilizes a civil defense effort, it is not a menacing gesture. But when a country with a credible first strike arsenal places emphasis on civil defense, it is an ominous signal.

Similarly, the draft would be a different sort of issue were we not an imperialistic country with a habit of making nuclear threats.

We have a strong anti-submarine capability; the Russians do not. They do not have overseas bases as we do. Their technology is way behind ours. They have only recently been trying to MIRV their subs....The Soviets do not load their subs with weapons, because they do not trust them. They are wary of communications problems and delegation issues.

Under the guise of "arms control negotiations," arms race escalations have been legitimized. Both superpowers have engaged in a joint agreement to fool each other's publics. Our strategy has been: "Rather than denying them something we would then have to deny ourselves, let's both be able to have it."

Roulette Model for First Strike Arms Race

Each side is betting on specific roulette numbers, on the probability of the outcome that the other side will be struck first.

When the U.S. puts a chip on a number for the Soviet Union to be struck first, the Soviet Union responds by betting similarly on a different number, toward the outcome that the U.S. will be struck first. This carries the accompanying cost of increasing the likelihood that the Soviet Union will be struck first.

Each additional number bet on (i.e. addition to first strike arsenal, space war, other provocations) increases the probability that one or the other will be the recipient of a first strike. They are competitively increasing the probability not only that the other side will be struck first, but that they themselves will be struck first. (And in either case, according to nuclear winter findings, both sides would be wiped out.)

Additional First Strike Nuances

On military mentality: Leaders tend to sooth themselves with overly optimistic assessments of the possibility of succeeding militarily--i.e., prevailing over an opponent. (Falklands, Afganistan, Vietnam...) They have a tendency to underestimate the capability and tenacity of the opponent. This same bent of thinking underlies current strategic planning. The combination of this mind-set with our existing policies is exceedingly dangerous.

LBJ and others have said: "I will quit before it gets to that point." But as the situation evolves, it continues to offer mirages of promise that the end is "just around the corner."

Additionally, power disposes you toward a kind of contempt for what you perceive as your racially or culturally inferior opponent. As a consequence, you tend to underestimate the opponent.

A number of genuine, very dangerous "nuts" in this administration do believe that a limited war could be controlled. But the prevailing attitudes, both now and in previous administrations, have been that it would not be possible to limit, control, confine to Europe, or win in any useful human sense, a nuclear war. HOWEVER: the fact that they do not believe in those possibilities does not prevent them from speaking as though they hold such beliefs. To do so supports the threat strategy on which defense of our interests has come to rest.

Possible Soviet responses: hitting our carriers, which are vulnerable and which are not on our terrain, in response to our initial limited use of nuclear weapons. They might say, in effect, "Tit for tat. And if you try to retaliate by striking our homeland, we will strike yours. And when we detect you trying to preempt, we will fire off our missiles, so that your missiles will find only empty holes."

Presidential Directive 59 (PD-59) called for two things: limited nuclear war and targeting of command and control. These two objectives are as antithetical as they could possibly be. What our government is seeking is not superiority in the old sense, i.e. destroying the other country including their retaliatory capabilities; but rather, escalation dominance: the ability to pose more credible threats to escalate than the other.